

The Crater

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But you ain't nothin' more'n a slave. No; nothin' to that."

"That suit you were wearing looked like a fairly good one to me," Maxwell said.

"You betcher life it does. That suit was a gift from Gawd. The whole outfit was. Nothing like it ever happened to me before. Two weeks ago some suffrage ladies come down to our neighborhood and had a rummage sale. I dunno yet what took me in there early 'fore work—it was like something inside me told me to go. This suit was there. It was all dirty and spotty, but it fit me fine. The girl who was waiting on me kinder got interested when she seen how dippy I was. Gee, I nearly had a brain-storm! So she helped find some other things for me. She gave the suit and the waist and the hat and the gloves and the—she called them 'spats'—for five dollars. I had three dollars saved up and my week's pay. I seen this was my chanet all right. And I beat it straight home and got the cash and come back. Five dollars! I didn't eat much that week. Of course I hadda buy some cleaning stuff to fix the suit up, but when I got through with it—well, you could see yourself how good-looking it is. But now I'm all right for the spring. I've gotta begin worryin' about the fall. And I'm tired of worrying. No. Nitski, Nix. Adolph for mine!"

ANOTHER silence fell. Miss Le Favor sank back in her chair.

"Miss Le Favor," Maxwell said evenly, "I came over here to New York from Boston a week or two ago. While I was here I saw in Tiffany's a very beautiful piece of jewelry—an opal pendant—the only piece of jewelry that I have ever wanted in my life. It was a black opal, but so full of fire that they had christened it 'the Crater.' I told my father about it when I went home, and he said that I might have it for a birthday present. I intended to go straight to Tiffany's the moment we had settled ourselves in the hotel. But we joined the parade and that prevented. I'm not going to buy the Crater now."

Maxwell paused; then went on in the same quiet tone:

"Instead I shall give the money to you. It is two thousand dollars."

Looking at Maxwell, Miss Le Favor's gaze changed to a stare. She seemed gradually to ossify where she sat. But presently came signs of returning life. Her mouth opened, although at first no words came. She could only gasp and sputter. "Two thousand dollars!" she finally brought out. "You're nutty!" she added roughly.

Maxwell's smile brought the shadow hollows bird-fluttering across her face. "I've been told that before," she admitted; "but I don't think it's true. You see, Miss Le Favor, it is my belief that there's only one sure cure for any kind of trouble. And that cure is—money. I don't care very much for money myself, but I think that's because I've always had enough—too much. So, if you'll accept my two thousand dollars, it is yours. My advice to you is to take it and to use it in training yourself for some special occupation. But I don't stipulate. I give it to you freely, with no strings. You will know better than I what to do with it, because you've reached the Pass of Desperation. And when people come to that Pass—"

The shadow hollows bird-flitted out of Maxwell's face. The serenity and austerity and solitude flowed back.

Miss Le Favor still stared at her.

"Two thousand dollars!" she muttered. "I'm dreaming. But I'd know what to do with it, all right. I'd go to a business college and fit myself for one of those twenty-five-dollar-a-week jobs. You watch me. I'll be some queen before I get through."

"What do you think, Cordie?" Maxwell asked.

"I say, bully for you! I was just

about to offer my fifteen hundred. Eight dollars a week! Think of it!"

"What do you think, Miss Carroll?" Maxwell asked this in the tone of one who courteously includes a stranger in the conversation.

"I'm afraid my opinion is of no value," Miss Carroll answered in the tone of one who retreats from committing herself.

"Would you rather have a check to-night, Miss Le Favor?" Maxwell asked. "Or would you like to wait and go down to the bank with me to-morrow?"

Miss Le Favor considered the question with a force of concentration, gnawing first at her upper lip, then at her lower one. "I'll take the check now," she said. "I ain't never had one before—you'll hafta tell me what to do with it."

Maxwell walked over to the desk, drew out writing paper, envelopes, a check-book.

"How do you spell your name?" she asked.

Miss Le Favor followed her. She hung over Maxwell's shoulder. Her eyes had changed from brown to yellow. At times those eyes glared like a tigress sensing her prey. She spelled her name.

"Now let me explain to you, Miss Le Favor," Maxwell said, after writing a moment. "This check is for two thousand dollars. It is made out by me to you. You see, it says here, 'Pay to the order of Pauline Le Favor,' and I have signed my name to it. Take it to the bank to-morrow morning. Wait; I'll write the name and address. Present this check at the window that says 'Paying Teller.' I'll write that down too. Now, the check being a large one, they may question you. On the back I'm going to ask you to write your name, and under it I'll write 'Signature guaranteed' and sign it myself. They will ask you to sign your name again—to compare signatures. Do you understand?"

Pauline nodded.

"Now, to make doubly sure, I'm going to give you this note to the paying teller. If he should still be uncertain, you call me up here and I'll talk to him."

Miss Le Favor scooped the check up from the blottered surface of the desk. "Oh, my Gawd!" she burst out suddenly. "I know I'm dreaming. It's too much like the movies." Suddenly she flung about and faced Miss Carroll. "What are you holding back, old frozen-face?" she demanded. "What have you got against me? You don't wanna see me have any luck, do you? Jealous! That's your trouble. Say, spit it out, will you? I wanna know what you're thinkin' and what you're gonna say about me the moment my back's turned."

MISS CARROLL'S face emerged from the shadow of her chair. She arose and switched on the lights. Miss Le Favor, the check tight in her hands, watched her. Then they both sat down.

"All right," Miss Carroll said in a clear voice. "I'll tell you just what I think. I think Miss Lee is doing the most foolish thing she could possibly do for you in giving you this money. And you're doing the most foolish thing you could possibly do for yourself in taking it."

Miss Le Favor put the check down on the table.

"What do you mean?" she snarled.

"I mean," Miss Carroll answered, "getting a big bunch of money like that isn't going to help any. It's only walking round the question. What good will two thousand dollars do you? Not a bit of good. Nor three, nor four, nor five. And why? Because it'll go the way all easy money goes. You ain't got any real ambition or spunk or grit or ginger, or you'd have found out long before this what you wanted to do and started to do it. You think you're going to a business college to fit yourself for something. I bet you dollars to doughnuts by to-morrow night you'll have two hundred of that two thousand spent on the flouziest outfit

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